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Medicine in the Fabric of Society

IT IS NOW increasingly evident that medicine has become an integral part of modern society, particularly in America. The health care enterprise, taken as a whole, is one of the largest industries in the nation, and within it medicine plays a seminal role. But, in addition, in one way or another medicine has come to influence or be influenced by almost every facet of today's society. In this sense medicine is becoming an increasingly important part of what might be called the fabric of society. Why is this happening, and what is its meaning for physicians and the medical profession as a whole?

There may be at least three reasons why medicine is beginning to be so interwoven with a changing society. First, many of the great advances in medical science and technology not only affect the way physicians practice but have also begun to create significant ethical, social, economic and political problems with which society as a whole must now deal in one way or another. Second, modern society, with its growing social, economic, political and, above all, technologic complexity and interdependence, is itself creating all kinds of new problems for medicine and health care that require new responses by physicians and the medical profession. And third, modern society is after all a human society, made up of humans whose behavior and responses are genetically as well as experientially determined, and who for better or worse are individually unique and must react within the framework of their biologic nature to all the stresses of the increasingly complex world in which we all live. Medicine is the professional discipline that deals with human adjustment or maladjustment to the stresses in the internal and external environments of the individual persons who in the aggregate make up modern society. If the stresses are manageable and adjustment is adequate, then health and well-being prevail, but when this is not the case symptoms of stress or frank ill health appear in individual persons or in groups of people. Physicians and the medical profession, therefore, find themselves promoting health and wellness wherever possible, and where there is unhealth they proceed with the diagnosis, treatment and correction of whatever maladjustment is impairing health whether in the internal or external environment, or both. So, modern society being what it is, medicine is coming to pervade much of its fabric.

What then should medicine be in today's society? Or, put another way, what *is* medicine in today's society?

- Medicine is *personal*—and *biological*. Adjustment and maladjustment in health and illness are very individual and very personal, and the mechanisms of adjustment and maladjustment are fundamentally biological in the broadest sense of human nature and human behavior.

- Medicine is *professional*. Physicians have been set somewhat apart by society, and given special training and special privileges to serve their patients and the public. As

professionals, physicians have set their own professional standards for their training and practice. This may be considered by some as elitist, but clearly it can be no other way.

- Medicine is *science and technology*. Its science and technology probe deeply into the nature and causes of illness, injury and emotional disorders, and the findings are applied to the promotion of health and well being, to prevention of ill health, to diagnosis and treatment to repair damage to the mind and body when ill health occurs and to restoring adequate adjustment to stress whether from a person's internal or external environment.

- Medicine is *art*. There is more to medicine than science and technology. The science is not exact and may never be. Furthermore, every person, whether sick or well, is unique, genetically and experientially different from everyone else. Medicine therefore has to be a human, caring relationship between doctor and patient (or the profession and the public, for that matter), with the art being to orchestrate the personal, cultural, scientific, technologic, social and economic factors that must be harmonized if there is to be health or if an unhealthy state is to be corrected in an individual or in the environment (society).

- Medicine is *social*. It is part of every known culture. The modern health-care enterprise is a complex social system, so far only poorly studied or understood. Social issues, growing out of the technical capabilities of modern medicine, are calling into question many of society's ways of doing things. In many ways medicine is actually a social science with much of this science yet to be developed.

- Medicine is *economics*. Medicine has become a significant part of the economics of modern society, and the economics of modern society has become a significant part of medical practice. Health care is a good product but it is costly. Medical economics is presently at center stage in health care and of much concern to both medicine and society.

- Medicine is *politics*. Medicine has been political in this country for more than a century. Its power has been, and still is, rooted in what is recognized as its competence in matters of health and health care. Now there is formidable competition in the political arena of health care. Medicine and health care have become everybody's business. The politics of medicine will not go away, and medicine badly needs a more identifiable constituency and a more positive program if it is to become truly effective politically.

There can be little doubt that the thread of medicine weaves through the fabric of today's society. It is not yet clear how strong this thread will be or just who will weave its pattern in the fabric. Will the pattern be decided by society? Probably so. But who will create the design? There is an enormous opportunity to weave (1) the underlying biology of human nature and human behavior, (2) the science, technology and art of medicine and (3) the social, economic and political realities of health and health care into a creative pattern in the fabric now being woven for the complex and interdependent society that is emerging in America today. An unanswered question is, does American medicine have the interest, the wherewithal or the resolve to be and be recognized as "physician to society," and in this role bring its skills to bear to help diagnose and treat the all-too-evident maladjustments in health and health care in this nation?

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